

A Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum Is Not a Proper Noun

By Thomas Many

Adapted from *Texas Elementary Principals & Supervisors Association's* TEPSA News, August 2016, Vol. 73, No. 4, www.tepsa.org

“One of the most powerful things a school can do to help enhance student achievement is to guarantee that specific content is taught in specific courses and grade levels.”

—DuFour and Marzano, 2011, p. 89

When researcher and author Robert J. Marzano (2003) introduced the term *guaranteed and viable curriculum* into the lexicon of educational best practice, he identified one of the most powerful ways to improve schools.

The *guaranteed* aspect of a guaranteed and viable curriculum (GVC) requires all students enrolled in the same class, course, or grade level *be* exposed to the same rigorous curriculum regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned. If what teachers teach is different from one classroom to the next, the curriculum is not guaranteed.

The *viable* aspect of a GVC recognizes that *teaching* the curriculum and *covering* the curriculum are two very different things. While teachers can cover a lot of content, to *teach* the curriculum requires *students learn* what teachers teach. If the amount of content for which teachers are responsible exceeds what they can reasonably teach within the time allotted, the curriculum is not viable.

To establish a curriculum that is both guaranteed and viable, teams of classroom teachers must engage in a process to build a common understanding of what students should know and be able to do.

“If schools are to establish a truly guaranteed and viable curriculum, those who are called upon to deliver it must have both a common understanding of the curriculum and a commitment to teach it.”

—Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano

Marzano (2003) recommends districts begin by providing “clear guidance to teachers regarding the content to be addressed in specific courses and at specific grade levels” (p. 24). The key word is *guidance*, and the implication is teachers will work together in a collaborative process to identify the essential standards with the support of district-level leaders and content-area specialists.

This guidance might come in the form of training, coaching, and providing extended opportunities for in-depth analysis of the standards. As teachers work together to understand the essence of what they should teach and students must learn, teams build the kind of shared knowledge and common understandings so essential to creating a guaranteed and viable curriculum.

Marzano (2003) maintains that a guaranteed and viable curriculum also means that “Individual teachers do not have the option to disregard or replace assigned content” (p. 24). Some districts—those where administrators contend teachers are unwilling or unable to identify the essential standards—use Marzano’s admonition to justify publishing curriculum documents filled

with long lists of standards content-area specialists at the state and local levels select. Once district leaders publish and distribute them to teachers, these documents become *the* GVC.

Unfortunately, the secret to creating a GVC is not more lists or another document; and while schools and districts should never return to the days when what a teacher teaches depends on his or her individual interests, talents, or expertise, mandating a specific set of standards absent any meaningful classroom teachers' input will prove to be an equally ineffective approach.

Others believe the key to a GVC is as simple as holding teachers accountable for teaching their $\frac{1}{13}$ of the curriculum (the teachers' portion of the students' thirteen years of schooling). These educators believe publishing the GVC ensures teachers will know the level of learning to expect and maintain that if teachers would simply take responsibility for teaching the $\frac{1}{13}$ of the curriculum for their class, course, or grade level, there won't be a problem.

This $\frac{1}{13}$ solution might be more reasonable if—and it's a big if—all students in the classroom are functioning at grade level and ready to learn. That condition does not exist in most schools. When students are not ready to learn grade-level content, teachers will go beyond, sometimes far beyond, the boundaries their $\frac{1}{13}$ of the curriculum establishes to meet students' needs. It makes no sense to deliver lessons to students who lack the prior knowledge or prerequisite skills necessary to be successful in the unit. It makes far more sense for teachers to use a consistent and coherent process for identifying the most essential standards and teach what they themselves identify as essential.

The most effective schools recognize the only way to develop a GVC is to engage teachers—with district-level leaders' and content-area specialists' support—in a collaborative process to identify what is essential for each class, course, or grade level. It is the combination of the expertise of district-level content-area specialists, coupled with the building of shared knowledge among teachers at the classroom level, that is essential to creating a GVC. It is not one or the other; it's both.

“We have a problem when the guaranteed and viable curriculum is viewed as a proper noun.”

—Tanya Batzel, Staff Developer, Cherry Creek Colorado

A GVC is not a proper noun; it is not a concrete object. It is not something that is contained within a notebook or available online. A GVC is the commitment between and among teachers to teach what the team has agreed are the essential standards.

In order to be successful, principals, coaches, and teacher leaders must recognize that creating a GVC is not a static, one-time event. It is a dynamic, ongoing process of building shared knowledge about what students should know and be able to do. To ensure a common understanding of and a commitment to a GVC, those coaching collaborative teams must commit to training and supporting teachers as they do the work.

The only person who can ensure all students have access to a GVC is the teacher who delivers the curriculum in the classroom. Those who are involved in coaching collaborative teams recognize that engaging teachers in a process to identify what is essential for all students to learn is the best way—perhaps the only way—to establish a GVC.

References

- DuFour, R., & Marzano, R. J. (2011). *Leaders of learning: How district, school, and classroom leaders improve student learning*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Marzano, R. J. (2003). *What works in schools: Translating research into action*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.